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Medieval plays [Review of plays at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater]

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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Medieval plays

by Curtis L. Carter

Although modern theater audiences are generally aware of the Greek roots of western theater, fewer are familiar with another perhaps more direct lineage from the medieval mystery plays of fourteenth century England. Direct references to the mystery plays in Hamlet and Henry IV suggest that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were acquainted with them, more so than modern audiences.

The compilation of "mystery plays" at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater is a rich and important contribution to the community's theater experience. It provides a seldom available set of materials which is in no way lacking in theatrical style, entertainment value, and thought provoking characterizations of basic human concerns.

For theatergoers curious about the popularity of "Superstar" there is a clue in the mystery plays, which also treat Biblical themes in a popular genre. The scope of the Mystery plays covering events from creation through doomsday is much wider but in spirit "Superstar" is kin.

Corresponding to the Christmas season, the twelve plays in Nagle Jackson's production are adapted from the Wakefield cycle, with the use of six other cycles as well. A cycle is simply the selection of plays common to a particular town. Cycles varied from place to place. The repertory performance includes works from the fall of Lucifer to the flight of Mary and Joseph in Egypt, running approximately three hours. A full cycle would begin at 4 a.m. and run 14 or 15 hours, also taking in events of the passion, resurrection, and doomsday.

In their original setting, the mystery plays, meaning dramas, performed by

the various guilds or trades, were often done in conjunction with the feast of Corpus Christi, a festival in honor of the Christian eucharist.

Acting in multiple roles, the company displayed versatility and range. The most memorable image of the evening for me was set by Judith Light (Eve) and Jack Swanson (Adam). Cast out of paradise, the two clutch each other momentarily, facing the world alone for the first time. Their faces speak a curious uncertainty and their bodies bow slightly as they experience the weight of felt uncertainties of future existence.

Alternatively, I found Jeffry Tambor's bumbling Joseph unfavorably reminiscent of his role as the general in "Cat Among the Pigeons." There is some justification for a certain ribaldness in the character of Joseph, but the portrayal here was too broad, leaving the impression of Joseph as a buffoon.

This important production has both historical significance and current theater value as an experience. It should not be missed.